Violence as a Political and Artistic Weapon in Selected Writings from Ulrike Meinhof and Heinrich Böll.

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Abstract

The revolutionary year of 1968 was a global phenomenon. The counter-culture movement in America was underway and people everywhere united against what were seen as war crimes carried out by American soldiers in Vietnam. In Germany, however, 1968 was a culmination of protest against the Vietnam War and the rebellion of the sons and daughters of the Nazi Generation and their struggle against what they viewed as an authoritarian West German State, which was not too different from Nazi Germany. The Baader-Meinhof group emerged as a protest group and quickly became a deadly terrorist organization. This essay discusses the historical background of the German situation and also looks at how this group attempted to rationalize violence as a legitimate tool in the fight against the state.

Keywords: Political Violence, Heinrich Böll, Ulrike Meinhof, West-German Terrorism, Germany, Radicalism.

1. Introduction

The subtitle to Heinrich Böll's 1974 novel *die Verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum / The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* is an interesting and rather fitting one: *Wie Gewalt entstehen und wohin sie führen kann / How violence develops and where it can lead* (Böll, *Katharina Blum*). The late sixties in the Federal Republic of German a number of radical left-wing groups emerged. Tensions between left-wing groups and those that they viewed as agents of capitalism, imperialism, fascism, and neo-fascism were high. Of major concern for the left-wing groups of the late sixties was the number of former Nazis that had held government positions in the post-war West German government. Protests against this moral hypocrisy occurred frequently; large numbers of groups turned to violence as a means to draw attention to these issues. The *Rote Armee Faktion* (RAF) was one of the first groups to adapt violence as a means to combat the problems in the establishment (Poiger, 653). Ulrike Meinhof, in her pre-RAF writings as a journalist and columnist, though at some points critical of the methods of the RAF, argued that the acts were also justified (Meinhof, "Counter Violence"). The government's reactionary efforts to combat these increasingly frequent methods of resistance were equally criticized by prominent authors, most notably Heinrich Böll. The most fascinating issue is how Ulrike, as the eventual rhetorical and intellectual leader of the RAF legitimized political violence as a tool of resistance. How was the use of violence legitimized and applied?

In order to understand the discussions of Ulrike and Böll it is important to have a historical background in which to place their arguments and critiques. The issues of the 'new left' in Germany in the late sixties were not a specific German issue; rather they were global issues protested against by citizens of various countries. From the summer of love in southern California in 1967 to the anti-war demonstrations in other parts of America people were engaged in serious social and political issues – the age of the peacenik. In West Germany, however, the shadow of the Nazi past was hard to ignore. The politically active youths of the sixties protested against the former Adenauer government as well as against the new 'Grand Coalition' government in 1966 (Poiger 646). Poiger argues that the most controversial action of the Grand Coalition came in 1966 with the attempt to pass through parliament the "Emergency Acts" – outlining procedures in the event of a state of emergency (646). This act radicalized the left due its similarity to the Nazi's Emergency Act.

Thus by 1967 events had created a premise for what Gerd Koenen labels "the red decade" (24). 1967 was also the year when vocal student activist Benno Ohnesorg was murdered while demonstrating against a visit to West Berlin by the Shah of Iran. Poiger argues that Ohnesorg became a martyr for the left-wing cause. He also states that in much the same way as the Nazi's rise to power coincided with the victimization of the Communists in 1933, the left-wingers were once again being deliberately targeted by the newly formed Grand Coalition (652). By this time many on the left were already radicalized to the point that, from their point of view, this was indeed the case. Against this backdrop of radicalization and violence emerged smaller fringe organizations such as the RAF who sought to continue the struggle against a government that which they considered oppressive.

During this period many writers were active in criticizing the government. It was Ulrike Meinhof, however, who would become an important government critic. Until 1970 Ulrike worked as a writer for the left-wing magazine *konkret* and thereafter became a member and intellectual voice of the RAF (Colvin 6). She was already a well-established voice in the public sphere when she joined the RAF in 1970. This drew attention to the fact that a woman, and a mother, would sacrifice everything in order to dedicate herself to the RAF. Colvin also points out that prior to joining the RAF, Meinhof had been one of the major leaders in the Extraparliamentary Opposition – a group formed by members of various left-wing organizations that rejected mainstream parties and ideas (8). She was an important voice in a chorus that was actively opposing the government's heavy-handed approach to left-wing radicals. Political Violence was quickly becoming, for Ulrike, the RAF, and for other groups, a legitimate means to an end. It showed that the RAF's rhetoric concerning the West German 'Police State' was much more than just rhetoric, as O'Boyle states (32). Her writing had been openly critical of both the state and also of the initial attacks carried out by the RAF (Meinhof, "Department Stores).

2. Theories of Violence

In order to discuss violence as both a weapon and tool for coercion one must have a definition for violence. Violence, it can be argued, may be political, religious, or even psychological. David Miller, a political and social theorist at Oxford, gives two liberal interpretations of violence; the first is that all violent acts are "morally prohibited", despite whatever the outcome is; the second interpretation he bases in philosophical existentialism, namely that in "certain circumstances" violence may be "therapeutic" and that performing the violent act releases the agent from "intellectual and emotional constraints of a repressive society" (402). Both interpretations can be applied in the case of Ulrike and the RAF. The state and its departments apply the first interpretation to the violent actions of the RAF in the late sixties, such as the arson attack on a Frankfurt department store in 1968 (Koenen 28). This attack was one of the first serious attacks carried out by Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin. Though this was a symbolic attack against capitalism the government and its agencies, including the press, only focused on the savageness of the attack in order to deter repeat attacks. The RAF itself applies the second interpretation that Miller provides. To the RAF the society in which they live is overrun by capitalism and corruption and in bombing a department store – a place where capitalism is indeed practiced – is the way they liberate themselves from the "intellectual and emotional constraints of a repressive society" (Miller 402).

In addition, Miller also states that anti-state violence can also be effectively politically (402). In many cases this may indeed be true – violent acts such as the arson in a Frankfurt department store certainly cause friction and demand discussion. The downfall, however, is that the continued use and misuse of violence, as Mr. Baader and the RAF misused violence, leads to reactionary politics. Following continued attacks, the West German government passed a reactionary law – the *Radikaleranlass* – which made it illegal for people, who were either radicals or members of radical left-wing groups, to find employment (Kemna 2). Baader's insistence of using anti-state violence proves that Miller's statement isn't necessarily true. The controversy caused by the opposition left-liberal movement and also by criticisms of the West German government had forced a hard push back by the government in order to stamp out the radicals from the public sphere for good.

Dirk Kaesler provides the final theory of violence that I will use: "Gewalt muss nicht immer brutal und körperzerstörerisch sein, sie kann auch sehr subtil eingesetzt werden als psychischer Zwang" / "violence does not need to be always brutal and physically destructive, it can also be used as a very subtle psychological coercion" (Kaesler). Kaesler states that violence is not necessarily always and physical is an important point. The attacks in 1968 on a Frankfurt department store, and in 1972 on Springer press in Hamburg were outright violent attacks on the capitalist system.

The attack caused reactionary efforts from the mainstream news media of the kind that Kaesler describes – enhanced coverage of the RAF and left-wing terrorism as well as character defamation. The *Radikaleranlass* of 1972 indeed enabled this kind of psychological violence - the violence against which Böll pushes back with *die Verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* and his article in *der Spiegel* titled "*Will Ulrike Meinhof Gnade oder freies geleit"/ "Does Ulrike want clemency or free escort"*. Thus overnight members and associates of the 'new left' were forbidden to hold public service professions (Kemna 2). The media's reaction was to portray not just the members of the RAF as a threat to the state, but also to portray people with left-wing sympathies as a threat to the state. Essentially it was 1950s American McCarthyism in 1970s West Germany. In fact, it was this kind of psychological violence that fanned the flames of the anti-left campaigns of the press and the government.

3. Ulrike Meinhof and Political Violence

These attacks drew the attention of left-wing columnist Ulrike Meinhof. The 1968 bombing of a Frankfurt department store and Ulrike's subsequent column about it created a catalyst for their first encounter. It was due to her growing fascination and sympathy with the group that she agreed to join Gudrun Ensslin, in 1970, in order to break Baader out of prison (Ascherson "Public Enemy No.1"). By bombing a posh department store in one of the most popular shopping areas in Frankfurt the RAF hoped to draw attention to the terror the Vietnamese people experienced daily as a result of the Vietnam War (Ascherson). That people were living comfortably in West Germany and that they were seemingly unconcerned with events in Vietnam angered Baader and Ensslin. Ulrike, too, was an anti-war supporter and had wanted expose the atrocities happening there as well ("Vietnam and Germany, 1966). Despite her disgust with the lack of interest and lack of support groups that opposed the Vietnam War she did not agree with the arson attack carried out by Baader and Ensslin. In 1968 Ulrike wrote that the attack on the Frankfurt department store – a symbol for capitalistic consumerism – did not make the forces of capitalism weaker, but that it "instead drives the very mechanisms that drive consumerism, and helps those who make money from it make even more money" ("Setting Fire to Department Stores", 244). Ulrike acknowledges that the attacks immediately destroy products and create tension – which in return draws attention to the issues Baader wanted to draw attention to – but she then argues that they do not, in fact, harm or damage the capitalist system. The reason she gives is a very pragmatic one: the attacks were in vain because the destruction of property only serves the capitalistic system in that the goods, which were insured, get reimbursed by an insurance company; the store replenishes its stock; the insurance company makes a profit; and capitalism emerges stronger and more intact than it was before the attack ("Department Stores, 244). What is gained from using violence against non-strategic targets? Ulrike's answer is that nothing is gained and that the spent efforts could have been better applied to something more meaningful. She also raises the issue of government concern for real social issues:

> What capitalism provides can be bought in a department store. What cannot be bought in a department store, capitalism provides only partially, incompletely, or insufficiently: hospitals, kindergartens, health systems etc. ("Department Stores, 245)

Ulrike describes a government that openly supports capitalism without even having the courage to maintain important public serves such as education or heath services. By attacking a department store Ulrike believes that Baader had inappropriate applied violent measures. She believes that more specific, important places should be attacked in order to create maximum resistance to the state.

Though Ulrike was critical of the department store bombing she had connected with Andreas Baader and by 1970 had abandoned her career, family, and civic responsibilities in order to assist Gudrun Ensslin to break Baader out of prison. Colvin points out that this jailbreak was the first public action of the RAF (51). Ulrike's writing had become increasingly militant, aggressive, and radical. She was now an important member of the RAF and had authored the group's 1971 communiqué titled "The Concept of the Urban Guerilla". The increased belligerence in her writing reflected her own, changing opinions about violence as an appropriate tool in the struggle against the state. She writes as the voice of the RAF "We [RAF] believe that this is the right moment, that it is possible and that it is justified to organize armed resistance groups in the Federal Republic and West Berlin" ("Urban Guerilla Concept"). There was no longer a distinction that the left-wing student movement in Berlin had made between *Gewalt gegen Sachen* and *Gewalt gegen Personen* / Violence against things and Violence against people – the former accepted and the latter rejected (Colvin 38).

The violence against 'things' – buildings, cars, etc. –, such as the attack on a Springer publishing center in Hamburg as well as on a Frankfurt department store, was no longer exclusive. As Colvin points out, the taboo of using violence against people was no longer functional (38). Physical violence – in contrast to psychological violence – had become a legitimate tactic due to increasing government efforts to sway public opinion against the RAF and the left-wing demands. The violence that was now accepted by the RAF was not only limited to kidnapping and bank robbery but it also included armed resistance against the state and the forces of capitalism and imperialism – which, to the RAF, included the government, Springer press, and the mainstream media. This new approach was in many ways a reaction to the recent emergency and hand-grenade laws; the RAF considered these laws to be merely a regression of the West German government to the fascism of the Nazi era ("Urban Guerilla Concept"). Whether these actions were legal was unimportant to the RAF. Ulrike states "the position of legality to that of illegality is determined by the contradiction between reformist and fascist tendencies in the government" ("Urban Guerilla Concept). Ulrike wrote no longer as a journalist; rather, she wrote as the voice of a rather small, yet armed radical group. This group sought to thwart what they perceived violence of the state against the left wing and radical scenes in the Federal Republic of Germany; they intended to counter the states violence with armed resistance of their own.

4. Heinrich Böll, Baader-Meinhof Group, and Political Violence

The increasing violence of the RAF had triggered scathing media coverage from Germany's tabloid paper *Bild-Zeitung,* a part of Axel Springer's publishing house – the same institution where peaceful protests in 1968became violent resulting in the in the deaths of two demonstrators (Colvin 33). The sensationalist headlines and stories of *Bild* had treated the RAF as murders and as the biggest threat Germany had faced since the Second World War. *Bild*'s coverage was of course both an attempt to portray the actions of Baader, Ensslin, and Ulrike as irrational and extremely violent and an attempt to create panic among the citizens of the Federal Republic.

One particular headline drew attention of author, essayist, and columnist Heinrich Böll. He authored an article, which appeared in *der Spiegel*, attacking *Bild* and the treatment of Meinhof. Böll, a known and respected writer, had added his voice to the debate surrounding the RAF. The title of the *Bild* article appeared as "Baader-Meinhof-Gruppe mordert weiter" / "Baader-Meinhof Group murders further" (Böll "Gnade oder freies Geleit?"). This was a reaction to the accusations that *Bild* had spread immediately following a bank robbery, which they assumed, and freely announced, was carried out by the 'Baader-Meinhof-Bande'. Böll does not disagree that bank robberies are brutal and violence, nor does he state that this one was in any way excusable. What does bother Böll, however, is the careless approach that both *Bild* and the chief investigator had taken in this case. For instance, Böll quotes the Chief of Criminal Police: "Wir haben zwar noch keine konkreten Anhaltspunkte, dass die Baader-Meinhof-Bande für den Überfall verantwortlich ist. Aber wir ermitteln selbstverständlich in dieser Richtung" / We have no concrete evidence that the Baader-Meinhof Gang is responsible for the attack. But of course we investigate in this direction" (Böll, "Gnade"). The investigator of the bank robberies states that there is no 'concrete' evidence that points to the Baader-Meinhof group and yet *Bild* had already decided they are guilty and claim, in their headline, that the group has 'murdered' again.

The handling of this incident by *Bild* is an example what Kaessler describes as psychological violence. Though the group was not yet determined to be the perpetrators of the bank robbery *Bild* acted as though they were. By doing this they reached a broad and general audience in West Germany; they spread falsehoods, slander, and created an even more critical public reception of the group. Böll points out *Bild* is the only source of information for millions of West Germans; the RAF cannot be fairly and constitutionally dealt with if they are facing this kind of violence by the press and the state. Indeed Böll goes so far as to compare *Bild* with *der Stürmer* and states that it is more widely read than the Nazi magazine had been. His problem lies not with whether or not Ulrike is a terrorist or not – this point he clearly states – rather his problem is with carelessness shown by *Bild* in its coverage of these events. What they have written and spread is as damning and violent as the carelessness shown by the RAF.

Unfortunately for Böll, his criticism of the media and press had led to a large counter-attack against him personally. He was harassed, accused of terrorist sympathies, and even received death threats (Bauer 74). The reactions he had caused also served to legitimize his statements and criticisms of the press. Though he was attempting to be objective in his criticisms the message had been lost on the audience he was trying to reach.

His attempt to provide a rational voice to the debate had been unsuccessful due to the RAF's use of physical violence against the state had used as well as the equally forceful response from the state and the press.

Responding to criticisms Böll published *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* a controversial book which highlighted the terrible effects of the state's attempts to eradicate the left wing movement in West Germany – both the radical left as well as otherwise normal citizens who were inclined to leftist ideology (Böll ,1974). Katharina had fallen in love with Ludwig Götten – a man who, unknown to her, was a being pursued by the authorities for being a left-wing terrorist – and had helped him escape her apartment. For the next four days she is interrogated, questioned, and harassed by the police because of her encounter with Götten. The investigators continuously accuse Katharina of saying things she had not said and of things that would help the case against her but are not necessarily true; while being interrogated by Beizmenne, for example, she says that she had had contacts with a man at her apartment for two years and Beizmenne immediately assumes it to be Götten: "Sie kennen den Götten also schon zwei Jahre?" / "You've known Götten already for two years?" (Böll, 32).

Katharina is also continuously attacked in the press by the curiously named Werner Tötges – one cannot help but notice the similarity between Tötges and the verb töten. Böll uses both Beizmenne and Tötges as symbols for the police and the press. Throughout the novel both are guilty of creating misleading facts about the crime Katharina allegedly committed and about her character. Tötges goes a step further in that he carelessly frames Katharina in the press as a communist and a whore. By the end of the novel Katharina is motivated to kill Tötges because of the treatment and portrayal she received from both the state and the press (Böll, 135). Böll shows that the State's intention to fight the political violence of the RAF and the radical left-wing was unsuccessful. Katharina forfeited her life because of the damning treatment she received and many others undoubtedly shared the same fight. How could one continue in a society that had taken her innocence and live with a press that had committed blatant character assassination? The State pushed against physical violence with its own form of psychological and societal violence.

5. Conclusion

To attempt to legitimize political violence is both immoral and dangerous. Harming any human being cannot be defended. The RAF, however, had felt so constricted and were left with what they thought was no other option except to resort to physical violence and urban warfare in order to continue the struggle against the State. Ulrike's participation and transformation from journalism to militant guerilla is shocking due to the fact that she felt so compelled by the struggle against the state to throw her life aside and join the fight against tyranny. The fact that many former Nazis had either held positions in the post-war Adenauer government or in the Grand-Coalition of the late sixties was the catalyst for many of the initial radicalized movements of the late sixties. The increasingly heavy hand of the state drove those on the left to even more desperate actions and eventual to armed struggle against the State. The reactions of the State, and the coverage of the struggle by the press had only driven the RAF to take more serious actions to achieve their goals. The debate had become to conflicted and so charged that even an intellectual like Heinrich Böll became in involved. His attempts to bring rationality to the center, instead of the polarization between the State and the RAF was unsuccessful; his article on Meinhof as well as his novel were noticed and unfortunately misinterpreted. This misinterpretation cause even more propaganda and so called 'psychological violence' against Böll – the kind of actions he criticizes in *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*. It is due to this that the use of violence can never be legitimized in order to serve a greater purpose; in fact, instead of creating friction and bringing awareness to a specific issue, it did exactly the opposite. The adaption of violence of the RAF overshadowed the very reason they resorted to violence in the first place – to counter societies apathy to State belligerence, as well as to counter the belligerence of the state itself. The reaction of the State was not to listen to the arguments of the RAF and attempt to change but it was to react even more violently to the RAF's actions. The answer, if there can even be one, to Böll's subtitle to *Katharina Blum* is that violence develops from violence and can only lead to more violence.

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